

Stages of development for the 3 to 5 year old

From the website of the Melbourne Museum, Victoria, Australia at:

www.museum.vic.gov.au/infosheets

This is a general summary of what the average child will be doing in their life at a particular age. It is in no way intended to be a guide to every child's developmental level and acts as a reference point from which to understand the developmental stages of a child's growth.

THE THREE YEAR OLD

Constant motion, eagerness, curiosity and joy of life characterize the pre-school age child. It is during this preschool period that abilities in all developmental areas undergo rapid change. Motor skills are being perfected. Creativity and imagination come into everything from dramatic play to art work to story-telling. Vocabulary and intellectual skills expand rapidly, allowing the child to express ideas, solve problems and plan ahead. Children of this age have a very strong belief in their own opinions. At the same time, they are developing some sense of the needs of others and some degree of control over their own behavior. They are striving for independence, yet they still need continual reassurance from adults to give assistance, comfort or rescue if needed.

Earlier conflicts, centered on struggles for independence, become fewer as children move through their third year of life. They are interested in co-operating and in accepting an adult's directions. They also have less need to have what they want "right now".

The three year old has an irrepressible urge to find out about everything in their immediate world.

Social Emotional

Three year olds enjoy being near other children in parallel play situations; they have begun to interact with other children in *co-operative play*. This is because at this age they have enough language skill to talk and ask questions. It is also because they are gaining an awareness that other people are "real" and have feelings and rights. They have now begun to take turns and are able to wait a short time for what they want. Many children of this age are beginning to form friendships with other children but are totally delighted when an adult really plays with them. They are good at using adults as a resource and will approach an adult to ask for help or show off something new.

They have begun to develop their sense of humor and “slap stick” is very popular, they laugh at the ridiculous and accidents are funny to them. Wild, silly gross motor activities have great appeal and movement and music activities can feed this interest.

The three year old is generally very agreeable, co-operative and eager to do what is suggested.

This is a common age for fears, especially around three and a half years – the fear is very real for the child.

Physical Development

Three year olds are capable of a wide variety of movements:

- ☐ they have become quite graceful in their movements;
- ☐ they swing their arms easily at their side and walk with sureness;
- ☐ they run with ease, gallop, jump and dance to music. In fact, they like to try all kinds of actions;
- ☐ they now enjoy climbing, balancing & throwing – although catching a ball is still quite difficult.

This is an ideal time to introduce creative movement experiences – and provide activities which are not structured.

The muscles of the hand are beginning to do what the mind tells them to do but holding a pencil, crayon or paint brush is still difficult. The “tactile” activities of play dough, clay, water and sand are a wonderful way for the three year old to practice using their hands in a controlled way. Squeezing, poking and rolling build hand muscle strength while pouring activities require co-ordination. All of these activities, as well as providing hand muscle practice also stretch the imagination as the materials take on different shapes. This is the year children usually learn to cut with scissors, string beads, inlay puzzles, fit together toys/games and do all of the manipulative activities.

Language and Cognitive Development

Some three year olds have trouble pronouncing all the sounds of the language, but they can generally say what they want to say and have most grammatical structures mastered. They love new words. The average three and a half year old has more than 1200 words in their vocabulary and it is important to keep in mind that children understand a great many more words than they actually speak.

They have begun to experiment with silly language and pronouncing words in silly ways. Nonsense rhymes and other word games appeal. Some activities which develop children's language skills are:

- ☐ music
- ☐ puppetry
- ☐ story telling
- ☐ poetry
- ☐ rhyming
- ☐ chants
- ☐ reading opportunities
- ☐ telling stories through use of a felt board
- ☐ science and art activities

THE FOUR YEAR OLD

This is a general summary of what the average child will be doing in their life at this particular age. It is in no way intended to be a guide to every child's developmental level and acts as a reference point from which to understand the developmental stages of a child's growth. Four year olds are enthusiastic, adventurous, bold, silly, eager and fun. This is the pre-kindergarten year when there is a growing interest in letters and numbers and things academic. They are not able to sit down and be quiet for long periods of time.

This is the age of interest in things such as monsters, dinosaurs and superheroes. They are very imaginative and there is often violence in their imagination. They also like making faces, singing silly songs and being funny.

Social-Emotional Development

Children at this age:

- ☐ are generally outgoing and boastful, but usually polite;
- ☐ may be jealous of other children who have been favored by friends or adults;
- ☐ may sometimes try to exclude another child from a play situation to preserve their social status with the playmate;
- ☐ are beginning to find sharing a bit easier, are starting to negotiating terms and have less of a need to protect possessions;
- ☐ are expansive;
- ☐ can be extremely bossy, and extreme in their emotions – they love and hate things with intensity;
- ☐ are still very egocentric.

Co-operative play is becoming important to them with much sharing of ideas. There is very little solitary play at this age. Part of their interest in violence seems to be developmental. They have violence in their imagination and their stories, it has to do with the issue of power. A child this age still feels quite vulnerable and has some fears. If they can identify with a superhero, it is easier to conquer those fears.

At this stage the imagination of children is flourishing, they love adventure, excitement and anything new and their imagination shows up in much of what they do. By now the child has had enough experiences with the world to sense its infinite possibilities and is at the stage where dramatic play comes into its own.

Physical Development

Four year olds are expansive in their movements. They run fast, climb high, gallop, jump and hop. It is a very "physical" age. They are not able to sit still for long and it is a stage where they really enjoy outdoor play with lots of running around.

Children at this age enjoy:

- ☐ activities which allow them to use their muscles and enjoy creative movement such as dancing;
- ☐ circle games (as long as they do not have to wait long);
- ☐ throwing and catching balls;
- ☐ activities with bean bags;
- ☐ parachutes, hoops and ropes;
- ☐ games and toys with many little pieces;
- ☐ building with cubes;
- ☐ construction toys;
- ☐ put-together puzzles;
- ☐ drawing, coloring and printing the letters of their names.

Language and Cognitive Development

Four year olds generally have a lot to say. Most of their language is now directed at other children rather than at adults, although they are good at asking adults for help. They can sustain play with other children for periods as long as 20-30 minutes and maintain reciprocal conversation throughout this play. They like to give information, particularly to adults. This is a noisy age and children are loud in almost everything they do.

The silliness and expansiveness of the typical four year old carries over to language:

- ☐ they enjoy playing with words and making up new, funny words and sounds;
- ☐ they love exaggerations and words like "enormous", "gigantic", "colossal" and enjoy extremes in their voices, such as shouting, whispering and telling "secrets";
- ☐ they experiment with swear words and "bathroom words" is also enormously interesting to four year olds and they delight in name calling.

This is also known as the age of "Why?"

The four year old likes:

- ☐ books that are adventurous or silly;
- ☐ books about giants, monsters, dinosaurs, animals in people roles, and machines;
- ☐ poetry, especially funny poetry;
- ☐ complexity in illustrations in their books but are able to enjoy a story that is told without pictures;
- ☐ to search for a small object on a page and gaze at the beautiful colors and patterns of well done art work.

This is the stage of development for language games, playing with sounds, picture matching games, category matching, "go together" pictures (e.g. toothbrush and toothpaste), puppetry, brief group discussion, show and tell, music and science activities. Like three year olds, four year olds still have a hard time dealing with abstract concepts or things that they cannot see, but they are interested in what is real and what is not real. It is a good time to interest them in the natural world. It is in this year that children usually begin drawing things to look like something. It is a time when children's imagination should be dominant, for stretching this imagination and encouraging their natural curiosity.

THE FIVE YEAR OLD

This is a general summary of what the average child will be doing in their life at this particular age. It is in no way intended to be a guide to every child's developmental level and acts as a reference point from which to understand the developmental stages of a child's growth. The five year old is more composed and "together". The typical five year old is calm, serene, wants to be good and generally looks on the sunny side. They love to be read to and talked to and like to learn new

facts. They are quite “academic”, but also still need spontaneity, creativity and fun.

Social-Emotional Development

The five year old is generally very pleasant to be around, they like to help and love praise. They have positive ideas and enjoy talking about them. At this age they can judge what they can and cannot do and impose their own limits. Taking things that belong to others and then lying about it is one of the more common behavior problems among five year olds. Because they want so much to be good, it is hard for them to admit that have done something wrong.

Children at this age:

- ☐ usually prefer playing with one or more children to playing by themselves;
- ☐ become very involved in dramatic play and assign roles and set the scene themselves;
- ☐ have imaginations which flourish and opportunities for this should be encouraged and provided.

Physical Development

The five year old’s body movements are poised and controlled. All kinds of movement activities and dance usually appeal to this age group. Skipping is a new skill for five year olds. They may even enjoy learning some simple dance routines. They continue to enjoy co-operative play.

Children at this age:

- ☐ are ready to begin printing letters on lined paper and can hold a pencil correctly;
- ☐ like to make lines, letters and drawings;
- ☐ are gaining skills at coloring within outlines but creativity should not be inhibited;
- ☐ enjoy puzzles with many pieces and can sew with large needles;
- ☐ enjoy making patterns and can work with more complex fit-together bricks.

Language and Cognitive Development

The language skills of five year olds are well developed. They enjoy talking about a wide range of subjects and many have the aptitude to start to learn to read. Using concepts through active games and activities is an aid to develop this skill.

Children at this age:

- ☐ enjoy all kinds of books, especially humorous story books, books where animals take on the roles of people and factual books that tell them about their world;
- ☐ are beginning to have the sophistication, the vocabulary and the ability to play with words that will allow them to enjoy funny poetry;
- ☐ enjoy a wide range of dramatic play opportunities and use props to represent many different roles and also enjoy acting out familiar stories and putting on simple plays;
- ☐ do not understand abstract concepts well and learn basic concepts by using all their senses and by manipulating objects, such as sorting activities using natural objects and being encouraged to notice details, likenesses and differences;
- ☐ enjoy art activities and drawings. Paintings are often accompanied by stories when they want to make something recognizable;
- ☐ will often have an idea ahead of time of what they want to draw and then will go about putting it on paper;
- ☐ enjoy all types of music activities, group singing, dancing and rhythm band instruments;
- ☐ understand most of the abstract concepts of space and time. They know the days of the week, the months and the seasons, although mostly they cannot tell the time except in a rudimentary way.

This is a very factual age and they really want to know more about how the world works. Books about insects, birds, mammals etc. are of great interest.

This is an ideal age for children to understand the system of mathematics, such as making and repeating patterns, grouping like objects together and ordering things from small to large. Simple exercises like how many children in the group have blue eyes and playing with hour glasses, egg timers and stop watches are all useful maths exercises and something that children enjoy.

At this age it is important to keep programs fun. Five year olds like to know a lot of facts and their "why" and "how" questions are their quest for knowledge.